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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMPREHENSION SKILLS.
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FACTORS RELATED TO COMPREHENSION ARE PHYSICAL HEALTH, MENTAL
DEVELOPMENT, EXPERIMENTAL BACKGROUND, WORD RECOGNITION, AND
THE PURPOSES OF THE READER. COMPREHENSION SKILLS CAN BE
GROUPED INTO THESE AREAS -- READING FOR DETAILS, READING FOR
MAIN IDEAS, READING TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN FACT AND
OPINION, READING TO FOLLOW DIRECTIONS, READING MAPS, CHARTS,
AND GRAPHS, READING TO PREDICT OUTCOMES, READING TO FOLLOW
THE WRITER'S PLAN AND INTENT, AND READING TO SUMMARIZE AND
ORGANIZE. PRINCIPLES FOR THE EFFECTIVE TEACHING OF
COMPREHENSION SKILLS AND EVALUATION TECHNIQUES ARE PRESENTED.
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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMPREHENSION SKILLS
(Session 17B)

In the attempt to help pupils to build skills in the area of comprehension, one must understand certain basic tenants. First, getting meaning from the printed page is the end product of the reading act. Children may be well informed with regard to phonetic generalizations, structural generalizations, and other word attack skills, but unless they can use these tools to secure meaning in the different areas of comprehension, the reading act will not be fulfilled. Second, comprehension is a global term which encompasses such abilities as reading for details, grasping the main idea, and differentiating between a fact and an opinion. Third, pupils develop an understanding of comprehension in light of the questions asked by the teacher. If the teacher asks only questions which involve details, the students

will gain the impression that effective comprehension consists only of reading for details. Fourth, materials used for constructing skills in this important area must be on the instructional reading level of the pupil. Students who are forced to read from a single text at a given readability level cannot hope to derive a satisfactory degree of understanding from the materials.

The Relationship of Certain Factors to Comprehension

If one is to help children with comprehension skills, the relationship of certain factors to this body of skills must be understood.

1. Physical. Children must be rested, alert, and anxious to learn if an adequate meaning is to be derived. The tired, anxious pupil cannot be expected to remember details. The status of the emotional and physical health of every student must be studied by every teacher.

2. Mental. We must realize that the entire reading act is a mental process. While a high level of intelligence is a distinct advantage to the learner, it does not necessarily insure a high level of comprehension. A clear understanding of each child's level of intelligence must be established.

3. Background of experience. In order for words to have meaning, the reader must be able to attach some kind of meaning to the words which are read. A child cannot fully comprehend the meaning of the word, "hydrant," unless he has seen a picture of the object or the actual object itself. The culturally disadvantaged child is apt to be particularly deficient in this area. To compensate for the lack of actual experience with objects and ideas, the teacher of these pupils must use such tools and techniques as filmstrips, films, and field trips.

4. Word Recognition. A prime prerequisite for building effective comprehension skills is a basic understanding of such word perception skills as phonetic analysis, structural analysis, and context clues. One cannot derive the exact meaning of phrases and sentences unless each word can be pronounced. There is little justification for beginning a sophisticated program in the various areas of comprehension until word recognition limitations have been corrected.

5. Purpose of the Reader. To gain a complete understanding of a given selection, the pupil must be given a purpose for reading. The use of a reading-study formula such as SQ3R will be of invaluable aid in helping a child secure intended meaning from a paragraph or chapter.

The Comprehension Skill Strands

As indicated in the opening section, comprehension must be thought of as a combination of several facets. Direct and sequential training must be given in each of these areas if the student is to be equipped to gain meaning from many different types of material. Each of these aspects is described in the following section.

1. Reading for Details. An essential aspect of total proficiency in reading at all age and grade levels is the ability to secure details from many different kinds of reading materials. The steps involved in completing an experiment or an income tax form will necessarily be a relatively slow analytical process which requires careful attention on the part of the reader.

2. Reading to Secure Main Ideas. Pupils at all educational levels

are frequently asked to read a selection at a fairly rapid rate to secure one main concept or idea. This skill calls for discriminatory reading in which the reader attempts to place a number of small details into a main idea. Practice should be given using paragraphs, chapters, and complete books as the skill is developed.

3. Reading to Differentiate Between Fact and Opinion. One of the most neglected and yet one of the most important skill strands is that of reading to decide if a given statement is a fact or an opinion. Pupils should be taught as early as the first grade that a statement may be fanciful or it may be factual. Older pupils must be taught to analyze copyright dates, different versions of stories, and the qualifications of authors. The attitude of the teacher is important in the development of the skill. The teacher who leads the pupil to believe that a given statement is absolutely true because it is in the textbook is doing little to develop his skill in the important area of critical thinking and critical reading.

4. Reading to Follow Directions. This skill must be developed adequately at every age level. Everyone is called upon daily to follow directions such as obeying a traffic sign, constructing a do-it-yourself furniture item, or completing an income tax form. Pupils should be trained in listening skills in order that verbal directions may be followed more explicitly. Numerous opportunities should be given for them to read written directions. They should understand that there is a purpose for all directions and that the teacher will not tolerate a "nearly" correct response.

5. Reading Maps, Graphs, and Charts. The skill of interpreting maps,

graphs, and charts is frequently taken for granted. These skills must be taught in a sequential manner at all grade levels. These aids serve the important purpose of conveying meaningful information in a short amount of space. The pupil who fails to interpret these items misses much of the story or article and does not have a clear understanding of the total body of concepts which are presented.

6. Reading to Predict Outcomes. The ability to predict outcomes is contingent upon the reader's ability to grasp details, his background of experience, and his ability to display a reasonable attention span. Active anticipation on the part of the reader leads him to develop a desire for the complete meaning to be derived from a given selection.

7. Reading to Follow the Writer's Plan and Intent. Since authors have unique plans for presenting a body of information, a very careful study of the writer's organizational pattern must be made. While most reading material usually contains a brief introduction, a body, and a summary of the total presentation, some writers choose other methods of compiling information. A careful analysis of the total plan will help the reader to assimilate the intended meanings.

8. Reading to Summarize and Organize. An efficient reader organizes and summarizes material in order to see the relationships among the various details presented in a selection. In a few instances, the summary may be the establishment of a mental concept in which the pupil summarizes a number of brief facts into a meaningful mind-set regarding a given topic. Summaries will more often take a written form in which the reader wishes to preserve certain ideas for use on later occasions.

Principles To Follow in Teaching Comprehension Skills

1. Remember that comprehension is a global term which encompasses more than just reading for details and parrotting them back to the teacher.

2. The sequential teaching and re-teaching of all comprehension skills is vital. Pupils don't learn to comprehend by osmosis or because they are efficient word callers. A careful formulation of reading objectives which will insure steady growth in all areas of comprehension, must be undertaken.

3. If comprehension skills are to be adequately developed, the reading materials must be at the child's instructional level. Materials which are too difficult frustrate the reader while materials which are too easy fail to challenge the child. If the child can comprehend at least 75 percent of the silent reading material, and can pronounce at least 95 percent of the words orally, one might make the judgment that a given selection is at the instructional level. A more formal analysis of any given material can be made through the use of readability formulas which have been constructed by Flesch, Dale-Chall, and others.

4. Reading purposes must be developed with pupils in order for satisfactory meaning to be derived. Before reading, the purpose must be established whether the reading is to be done to gain details, main ideas, or a significant generalization. Teachers are guilty of contributing to ineffective comprehension by asking pupils to "read chapter 5 for tomorrow" without additional comments. The importance of establishing questions which form a purpose for reading cannot be overstressed. As pointed out in another part of this presentation, students must be

made to understand that effective comprehension consists of more than the mere recall of selected details. Teachers should give instruction and practice in all of the comprehension skill strand areas.

5. Pupils must be taught that writers have many different styles of writing and they must determine whether the topics are written from a subjective, fictional, or factual point of view. The reader must decide very early in the exercise what kinds (if any) of information he is seeking and what methods and procedures should be employed. For example, if he decides that the article is of a controversial nature, he should apply critical reading techniques and compare the statements of the material in question with pronouncements found in other sources which have been written in the same subject area.

Steps For Building Effective Comprehension Skills In All Subject Areas.

Well-developed, sequential lessons must be planned and executed in all content areas if a high level of comprehension is realized. The following steps must be implemented if this objective is constructed properly.

First, the teacher must build readiness for the selection which is to be assigned. During the period, a discussion with the pupils should be held at which time each of them would recall any experiences which he has had regarding the topic. Difficult words, phrases, and concepts should be introduced and explained. Guiding questions by the teacher and the pupils should be compiled with additional questions selected from the textbook or workbook. Many different kinds of books besides the textbook should be available in order to care for the wide range of

reading levels which are typically present in a heterogeneous classroom.

Second, the period for silent reading must be scheduled. Observation should be undertaken to locate pupils who have improper silent reading habits such as finger painting, lip movement, and sub-vocalization.

Third, a general discussion of the study topic should be undertaken in light of the guiding questions which were established during the readiness period. In some cases oral rereading of certain passages of the selection may be appropriate to clarify and substantiate certain ideas and concepts.

Fourth, meaningful culminating activities in such areas as social studies and science might serve to clinch essential principles which are explained in the written material. A time line might be constructed by the pupils after they have read various selections on the topic "Important Events in American History." The use of audio-visual aids such as films and filmstrips, may also serve to reinforce important facts.

Evaluation of Comprehension Skills

A knowledge of each pupil's strengths and limitations in the area of comprehension must be established on a continuing basis. The use of a subjective reading inventory or some other informal device may lend valuable information in this important area. Several commercial tests such as the California Achievement Test, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Diagnostic Reading Scales, Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulties, or the Gates-McKillop Reading Diagnostic Test may be used profitably in

the evaluation procedures. A careful observation should also be made of the reader's oral responses to various types of questions. The instructional program should be based on the demonstrated needs of the pupils as revealed by the results of these tools and techniques.

Summary

Getting meaning from the printed page is the end product of the reading act. Comprehension is a global term and is composed of many different facets. If comprehension skills are to be developed properly, every teacher must construct lesson plans which will insure that ability in this important area is developed in a sequential manner. Establishing readiness for a given topic, scheduling a silent reading period, discussing the topic, and developing appropriate culminating activities will help each pupil to understand intended meanings in a given subject area. Various evaluation procedures should be employed to help the teacher structure the proper instructional program in comprehension.